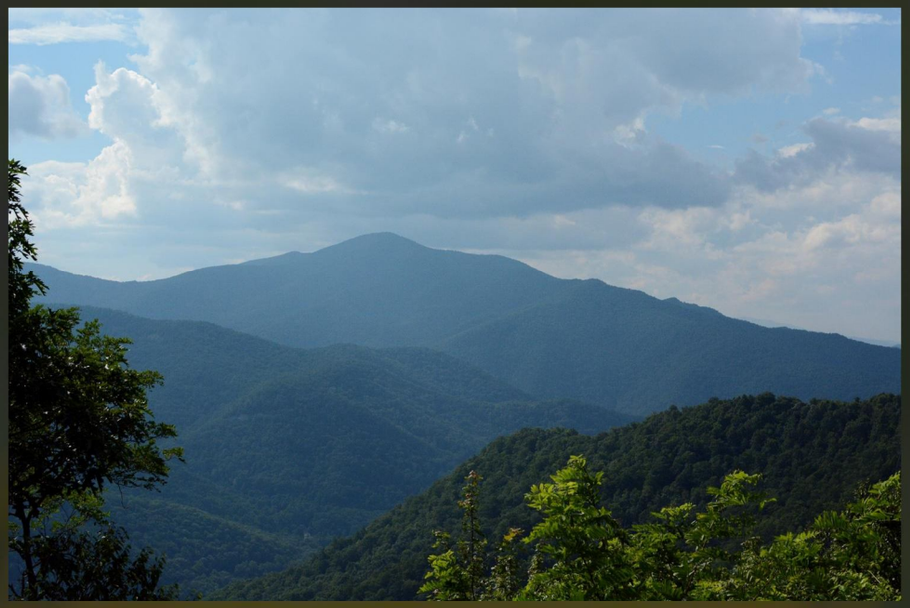

A Pictorial Guide to the Monarch Butterfly Migration over the Southernmost Blue Ridge Parkway

A favorite scenic road of the eastern United States, endless gorgeous views, and one of the most amazing migratory creatures in the world—all make for an ideal fall day outdoors. This guide will help you make the most of your day, with tips of when and where to look, facts and photos of the monarch lifecycle, information on learning more, and practical ideas on how you can help the monarch butterfly population grow. Plus, there's a section on the best short hikes accessible from the parkway.

Mickey Hunt has been exploring along the southern Blue Ridge Parkway with his family for 30+ years. He lives in east Asheville.

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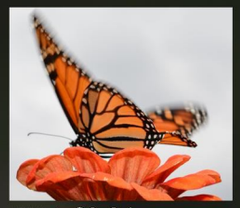

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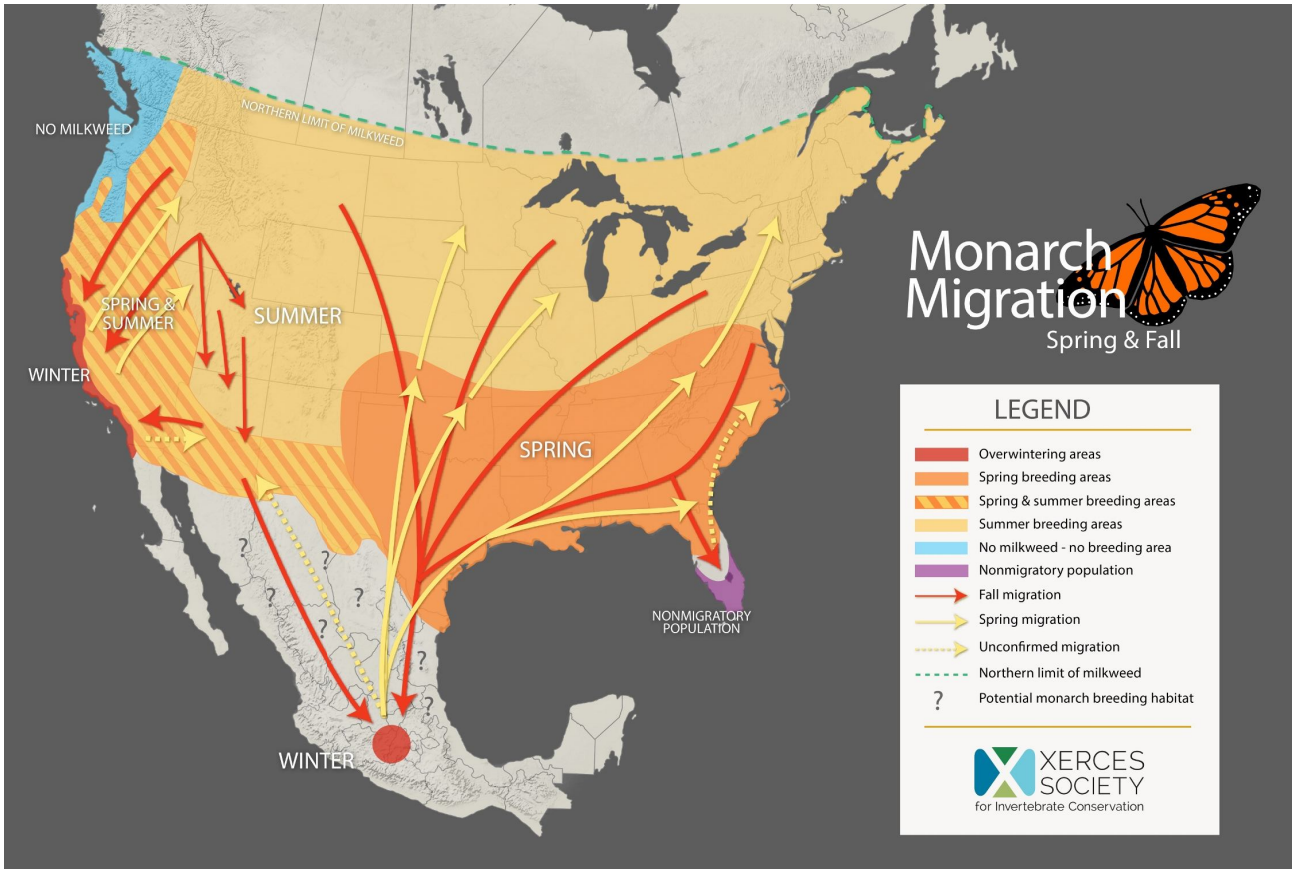
A Pictorial Guide to the Monarch Butterfly Migration over the Southernmost Blue Ridge Parkway

MICKEY HUNT


NO MILKWEED
NORTHERN LIMIT OF MILKWEED
SPRING & SUMMER
SUMMER
WINTER
SPRING
NONMIGRATORY POPULATION
WINTER
Monarch Migration
Spring & Fall
LEGEND
Overwintering areas
Spring breeding areas
Spring & summer breeding areas
Summer breeding areas
No milkweed - no breeding area
Nonmigratory population
Fall migration
Spring migration
Unconfirmed migration
Northern limit of milkweed
Potential monarch breeding habitat
XERCES SOCIETY
for Invertebrate Conservation

ENTERING
BLUE RIDGE
PARKWAY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

A Pictorial Guide to the Monarch Butterfly Migration over the Southernmost Blue Ridge Parkway

Mickey Hunt

Chaotic Terrain Press
Asheville

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Cover photo, 9/25/15, Pounding Mill Overlook
Back cover, 8/3/17, Cold Mountain

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ISBN 978-0-9845111-9-8

Printed in the United States of America.
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Monarchs clustering on goldenrod along the Blue Ridge Parkway. 9/25/16

Purpose of the Guide

Monarch butterflies are the champion marathon flyers of the world.*

A monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) on average weighs .5 grams. A monarch from Canada migrating to Mexico and then back to Texas in the spring will have traveled 4,000 miles. Weight for weight, this amazing feat is equal to 265,842 complete through-hikes from Georgia to Maine on the Appalachian Trail by a 160-pound person. And the monarch doesn't need a backpack, rather it collects its food on the way.

Monarchs even exist in Hawaii and New Zealand, (as well as on the eastern coast of Australia and in Indonesia), and though the species originated in North America, they are considered native in those islands because they supposedly became established on their own, without human introduction. How it happened is a mystery.

The Balsam Mountains of the Blue Ridge Range, itself a part of the Appalachian Mountains, contain major regional flyways of the monarch, in part because the butterflies are funneled by the topography to cross the Balsams in the gaps. Monarchs are efficient flyers, and the gaps allow the butterflies to cross the mountains at lower elevations, thus saving them work. Since the southernmost Blue Ridge Parkway follows the ridgeline of the Balsams, and since plenty of nectar sources bloom along the parkway during the early migration season, it's a perfect combination to view the butterflies up close on their southward journeys. Be sure to look at the Xerces Society's monarch migration route map on page 1.†

This guide is to help you discover when and where to observe these fascinating creatures; it gives tips on how to observe them and provides seasonal information on monarch learning opportunities in western North Carolina. Plus, it will introduce you to monarch conservation and how you personally can help restore their numbers to a viable, self-sustaining level. Don't miss my endnotes on visiting some of the western U.S. overwintering sites in California.

***** Some claim that the Painted Lady Butterfly (*Vanessa cardui*) holds the title.

† For nuance about migration patterns, see Monarch Watches's discussion at: **monarchwatch.org/blog/2010/05/13/two-way-monarch-migration-map.**

Monarch Lifecycle

A female monarch Butterfly laying eggs in my milkweed garden. She likely flew thousands of miles, overwintering in the Trans-Volcanic Mountains in Mexico. Her color is faded from long travel and exposure. 4/19/17

Monarch butterfly eggs (ova) Size: 0.9 mm x 1.2mm. Eggs will hatch in 3-8 days, depending on the weather. Photo taken in my milkweed garden 4/19/17.

Early Instars of monarch butterfly larvae, or caterpillars. The larvae go through five instar stages over 9 to 14 days before they transform into chrysalides. Photo taken on 4/29/17 in my milkweed garden.

A 5th instar larva. 25-45 mm long. Taken 9/19/16, also in my milkweed garden.

A 5th instar in the "J" formation, prior to transforming. 5/18/17 —When a larva is ready, it seeks a suitable place to spin a silk pad. It hooks into the pad with the hind prolegs. There it will hang for 24 hours. When the larva straightens, it will shed its skin and embed the cremaster post that the chrysalis hangs by.

A chrysalis a few minutes after the larva shed its skin. 5/18/17

Left, a jade-green monarch chrysalis. On the day before the butterfly emerges, the chrysalis begins to add pigment. On the day of, you can see the butterfly's wings through the transparent shell. 7/28/17 & 10/9/16

A new butterfly after emerging (eclosing) from its chrysalis shell. The butterfly pops out and starts twisting back and forth. The shriveled wings imperceptibly expand as the rather plump abdomen shrinks. From a video of the whole 30-minute process at my YouTube Channel, ***UniversalDirt****. 6/2/17*

An adult female feeding on a zinnia in my garden. 10/26/16

Mating in a tree, and the cycle begins again. 6/22/19 —In late summer, shorter days trigger diapause, so the butterflies can't mate, but prepare for southward migration by nectaring heavily and building fat. During the breeding season, the butterflies live 2 – 6 weeks, but migratory ones can live 8 months.

When and Where to Watch

The monarch migration passes over western North Carolina beginning about mid-September and lasting through October. During this period in downtown Asheville, I once counted five or six butterflies in an hour all flying in the same direction, so they can be seen anywhere. I've even seen them in my garden in early November.

The best time to view the butterflies on the Blue Ridge Parkway is obviously during the local peak of the migration when you can see hundreds in an hour. It's impossible to predict year by year exactly when this will be, and it varies according to temperature and weather patterns. One year, strong winds may have pushed the migration flyways east and we saw few butterflies. In my experience, the peak was around the last week of September through the first week or so of October, encompassing three weekends, but in the fall of 2017, the peak was later in October. Volunteer monarch watchers track the migration every year and report at **learner.org/jnorth/monarch**, so you can follow the progress south.

Weather and What to Look for

Migrating monarchs tend not to fly in the rain, nor into strong winds. So, your best chances to see them on the parkway are on sunny days, in the middle of the day, with light breezes from the north. In those conditions in the right locations, you can find dozens flitting about feeding on goldenrod and aster blooms. They stick around for hours, giving plenty of opportunity for photography and just plain enjoyment. You may see a hobbyist entomologist with their net, catching, tagging, and releasing them. But if the sky is cloudy but dry, and not too windy during your parkway drive, don't despair because monarchs are still flying. On such a day they don't stop to feed, but will just glide over the tree tops and disappear over the descending hills to the south. Watching north you may see them arrive at the ridge from the valley, or looking up you may see their dark, slightly orange silhouettes floating against the gray background. If you are observant, you can see lots of them, some quite high.

If you plan to make a day of it, bring a lawn chair, your camera, binoculars, food and drink, sunscreen, and an extra clothing layer.

It may not seem like much, but this might be what you see. The migration will look like this in some places, though with greater numbers, of course. On a cloudy day, the monarchs show as dark silhouettes against the sky. 9/25/16

On sunny days the monarchs pause to feed, and it's a feast for the eyes. The butterfly in the foreground is male. You can tell by the dark brown spot over a black vein on the lower right ventral wing. The spot can be better seen on the interior title page of this guide. Females have no such spot. 9/25/16

Best Locations

During the peak migration period, it's possible to see monarchs at many pullouts and overlooks on the southernmost Blue Ridge Parkway. The butterfly flyways over the mountains seem to change from day to day depending on local air movement, so on any given day, a few may have heavy traffic while others have none. These sites below are some of the best ones I have found so far.

Ridge Junction Overlook (mile 355.3)

Elevation 5160 feet.

"Richard" reported at Journey North seeing 60 butterflies here on 9/29/17. On 10/7/17, I counted 20 in thirty minutes, feeding, or flying overhead. This location offers stunning views toward the slopes of Mt. Mitchell and beyond to Table Rock and Hawk's Bill. This overlook is 100 yards north of the entrance road to Mt. Mitchell State Park.

Mills River Valley Overlook (mile 404.5)

Elevation 4085 feet.

The nice part about this site is you have long distant views on both sides of the ridge. I've not seen large numbers of monarchs here, but other observers reported they've seen thousands of migrating broad-winged hawks. (See more about the hawks on page 18.)

Pounding Mill Overlook (mile 413.2)

Elevation 4700 feet.

One of the best locations for seeing monarchs feeding because of the abundance of goldenrod and aster blooms on both sides of the road, though you can also see butterflies gliding down from over the rocks on the north side. On sunny, warm days, they stick around for a long time, which makes it easy to take photos, even close-ups, like the one above. As always, be mindful of traffic when crossing the road.

Cherry Cove View Overlook (mile 415.7)

Elevation 4327 feet.

One of the best locations for seeing monarchs pass over, as indicated by the special informational plaque at the site. One day we counted 95 in 15 minutes, a rate of roughly 400 an hour.

John Rock View Parking Area (mile 419.4)

Elevation 5330 feet. John Rock is 3200 feet.

Just .5 mile "south" of the over-popular Graveyard Fields, but off the road a little, this site affords a bit more quiet and privacy than other places. There's plenty of goldenrod and aster, and on the right day, plenty of monarchs feeding or gliding overhead.

Fetterbush Overlook (mile 421.7)

Elevation 5494 feet.

I like this site, but it hasn't been consistent year to year. 1.4 mile S of the Black Balsam road, and just N of the Devil's Courthouse tunnel.

Caney Fork Overlook (mile 428.0)

Elevation 5660 feet.

This is my favorite viewing site simply because of the amazing panorama to the west, as you can see in the photo on page 14. It's somewhat exposed and has no shade. In 2016 I met some people who were tagging, and I helped them net a little, though both they and I were inexperienced. The site is 4.5 miles S of state road 215.

A lovely monarch frozen in flight along the BRP near Pisgah Inn. 10/5/17

Additional Observation Locations

I've seen a report at Journey North of 25 monarchs near BRP milepost 274 on 9/25/16. An interpretive ranger recently told me he liked to watch monarchs on the bald N of Mt. Hardy. (The Mt. Hardy View pullout is at mile 422.4.) I imagine there are other places where the butterflies cross as they travel south. What I found in fall '17 is that you can see monarchs almost anywhere on the southern Blue Ridge Parkway where wildflowers are blooming. Driving north from

Asheville on October 7, 2017, I counted six monarchs at the Bald Knob parking area, five on the private field adjacent to Gooch Gap, and two in the meadows at the Linville Falls Visitors Center turnoff. (I also counted 15 monarchs in ½ hour drifting over Mr. K's Used Books, Music & More at River Ridge Mall in Asheville, and another day I witnessed several flying over McDowell ST. Then there was the solo southbound monarch fighting across a busy intersection of Tunnel Road.) Moral of the story: ***keep on the lookout.***

Following are additional observation sites, some experienced myself, and some learned about from other monarch watchers.

Craggy Gardens Visitors Center (mile 365.5)

Elevation 5497 feet.

Likely if you are planning to go to Mt. Mitchell from Asheville, you will stop here. I've seen monarchs over the parking lot, but I didn't spend a lot of time there to see if it is a significant route. The Visitors Center has a gift shop and bathroom facilities. One of the best views along the parkway may be gained by the short hike up the next-door Craggy Pinnacle, just to the north.

Pisgah National Forest

"Keith" reported seeing 1000 nectaring monarchs on 9/29/17, two miles north of the BRP below Tennet Mountain on the Graveyard Ridge Trail, between Ivestor Gap and the MTS trail. Take FS Road 816, which is just west of Graveyard Fields. You'll need to consult the Shining Rock & Middle Prong Wildernesses Forest Service map and then hike a mile or so to reach this location.

Haywood Gap (mile 426.5)

Elevation 5,400 feet.

"Sherilyn" reported at Journey North that she counted 1,400 in two hours on 10/13/17. The observer "D" reported seeing the same astonishing phenomenon the same afternoon at Cherry Gap.
I stopped at Haywood Gap on the 15th and met Sherilyn, sitting on the guardrail. She said there were so many butterflies on the 13th that she and D could count only *half* or less of what they saw, and the actual rate was 60/minute, which equals 3600 an hour! While we talked, monarchs streamed over and around us for several minutes, moving easterly as they crossed the gap. It was thrilling. Sherilyn

later reported counting 315 for that day. Haywood Gap is not an official overlook or view, but it does afford a bit of parking on gravel or grass on the north side of the road.

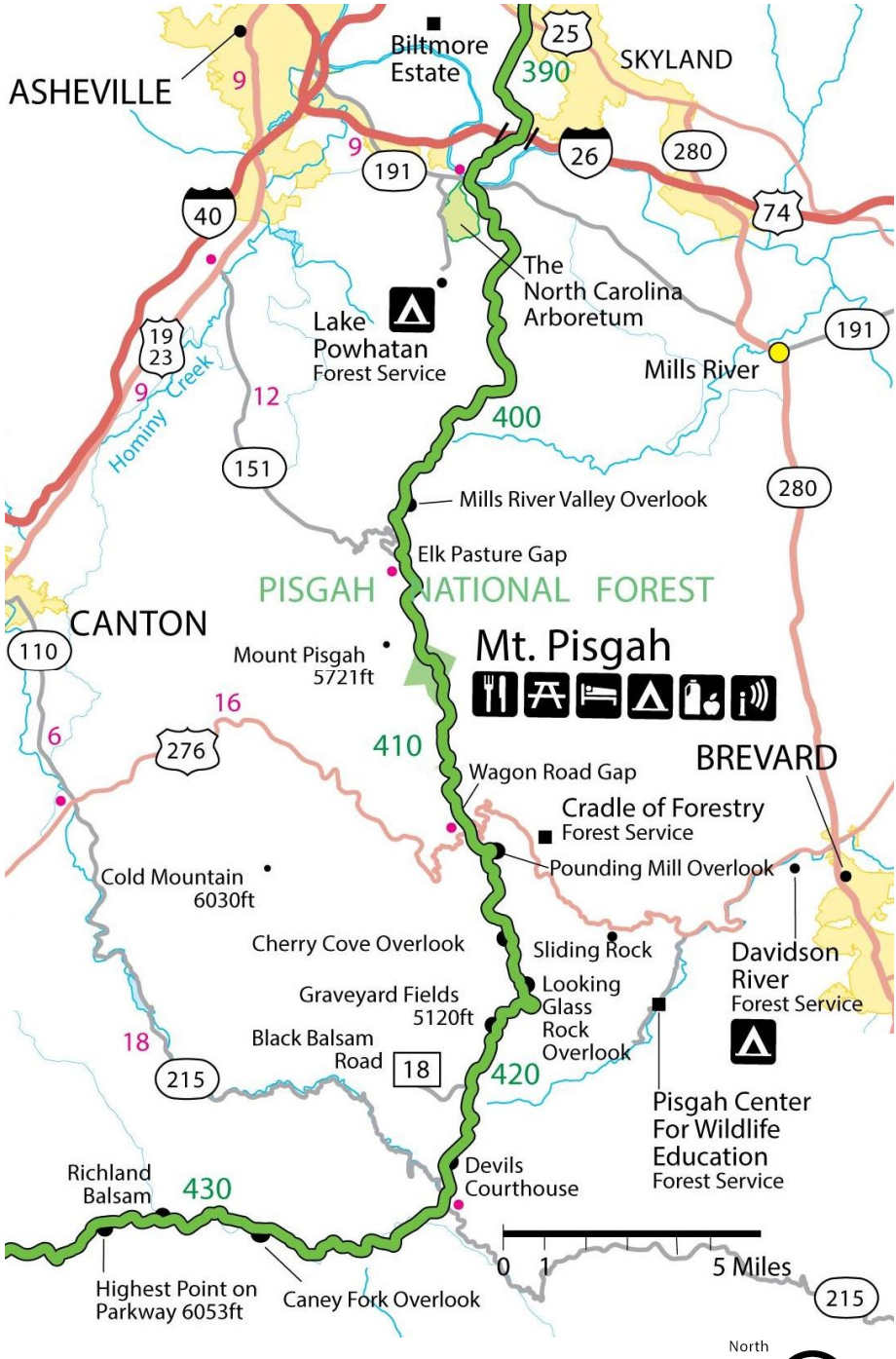
Other reported locations: View Hornbuckle Valley m453.4, Woolyback OL m452.3, Scott Creek OL m448.9, Woodfin Cascades OL m446.0, View Mt. Lyn Lowry m445.2, View Double Top Mountain m435.3, Roy Taylor Forest OL 433.3, View Devil's Courthouse m422.4, View Looking Glass Rock m417.0, Cradle of Forestry OL m411.0.

And don't forget the northward migration, which you can better observe if you plant milkweed for those fifth generation females returning from Mexico and for their hungry offspring. While we're on the subject, begin preparing for your nectar garden. I've noticed during the late fall season how few flowering plants are still in bloom. Most goldenrod and asters are in senescence, but my zinnias are still blooming. Long distance monarchs need fuel, so plant zinnias!

Monarch Migration
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Orange-brown, black-striped monarchs are the only butterflies that migrate. On their southward flight in September, large numbers cross the mountains at several points in this area. Tunnel Gap is a popular place for viewing this striking event.
Many monarchs that pass here spend the winter on the Florida panhandle; some may journey as far as central Mexico. In spring they head north, breeding along the way and depositing their eggs on milkweed. During the slower spring migration, monarchs travel in smaller groups.
No single monarch makes the entire round trip. Offspring that hatch along the northward route either remain where they are born or journey on to the northern starting point.
Sudden storms and migrating hawks pose the greatest threats to migrating monarchs.
CANADA
UNITED STATES
MEXICO
Autumn migration routes taken by monarchs in the eastern United States.
Before migrating, monarchs fatten themselves with nectar. This gives them the energy to make their long trek.
The plaque at the Cherry Cove View. 4/30/17

The National Park Service frequently closes sections of the Blue Ridge Parkway, especially in winter due to snow or ice, though sometimes in other seasons because of rock slides or fallen trees, especially after storms or heavy rain. You can check for closures at **nps.gov/blri** and then go to the **ALERTS** section to find the **Real Time Closure Map**.

Check out the fascinating book, **Monarchs and Milkweed:** ***A Migrating Butterfly, a Poisonous Plant, and Their Remarkable Story of Coevolution*** by Anurag Agrawal, 2017 Princeton University Press.



Detail of a former official Blue Ridge Parkway map with a few small changes. (Map courtesy of the National Park Service.)

A broad-winged hawk soaring off a thermal above the BRP. 10/2/14

Other Migratory Creatures over the Parkway

While you are visiting the southernmost BRP and keeping a lookout for monarch butterflies, be aware that a number of flying creatures other than monarchs pass over these mountains. With binoculars I've seen way up in the sky what might have been a sparkling, fast-moving cloud of migrating hummingbirds. One afternoon we watched as countless solitary beetles shot overhead. I wonder what they were? Yellow cloudless sulphur butterflies (*Phoebis sennae*) zigzag a crazy, frenetic path over the ridges, never stopping to feed or say hello, which makes it practically impossible to photograph them.

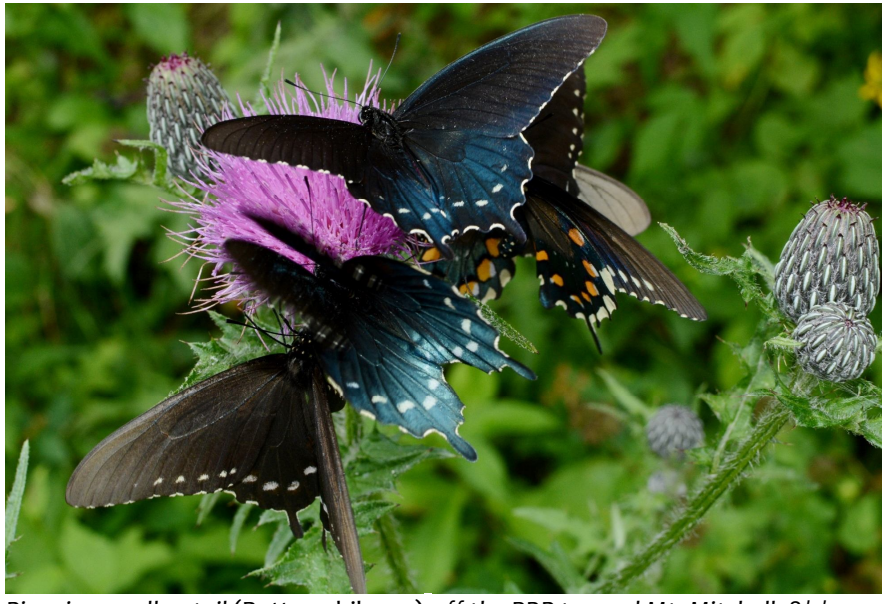
Probably the most spectacular migrant is the broad-winged hawk (*Buteo platypterus*) on their 4,500-mile journey from the northeast U.S. to South America. One online report from a birder near Grandfather Mountain claims an estimated 10,000 in a day. Hawk Watch International (**hawkwatch.org**) reports they count an average of 700,000 raptors each fall over their platform at a county park along the banks of the Nueces River about 17 miles west of Corpus Christi, Texas. The eight-day peak of September 22-30 brings as many as 100,000 raptors in a single day, 95% of them being broad-winged hawks. Weather can affect the hawks just as they do monarchs.

Apparently, one of the most popular BRP hawk viewing spots is located near milepost 235 at the Mahogany Rock Overlook. Also, the Hawk Migration Association of North America lists the Mills River Valley Overlook (mile 404.5) a little N of Mt. Pisgah as an official watch site, though it has been inactive in the past couple years.

Look for broad-winged hawks on the parkway especially in mid-September. Flocks of a dozen or even hundreds spiral upward, forming what ornithologists call "kettles" (caldrons) to catch rising thermals and gain altitude before shooting off south or southwest.

Non-migratory Butterflies on the BRP

While you are looking for monarchs, you're likely to spot other butterflies and moths. Based on casual observation, I'd say that the most common and noticeable Lepidoptera will be a dark swallowtail butterfly. There are four species of "darks" in the southeast that have various combinations of (or the lack of) blue, blue iridescence, orange, black, white, and yellow, in dots, dashes, splotches, commas, and patches. It takes a sharp and knowledgeable eye to tell the species apart. The common names of these species are the black swallowtail, the eastern tiger swallowtail in the dark female morph, the spicebush swallowtail, and the pipevine swallowtail.



Pipevine swallowtail (Battus philenor) *off the BRP toward Mt. Mitchell.* 8/1/17

Status Update on the Monarch

Probably the best way to determine the health of the monarch butterfly population in North America is by monitoring overwintering butterflies, which is possible because they concentrate in the central highlands of Mexico, 100+ miles west of Mexico City. The U.S. region west of the Rocky Mountains has its own regional population of monarchs that overwinter in California and comprise about 5% of the North American numbers, *though recent counts by the* **Xerces Society** *portend a serious decline in the west.* The rest, except for some in southern Florida, overwinter in Mexico in 12 to 14 colonies scattered over a wide mountainous area. Over half of those colonies are located in the protected 56,259 hectare **Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve**. Since it's impossible to count the butterflies, which gather in thick clusters on oyamel fir trees (*Abies religiosa)* and may number as high as 60.9 million butterflies per hectare,***** scientists record the total number of hectares covered. **One hectare equals 2.47 acres.**

On the graph across from this page, you'll see the peak of 18.19 hectares in the winter of 1996-1997 followed by a sharp drop to 5.77 hectares for the winter of 1997-1998. There are ups and downs, but a seemingly downward trend until the winter of 2013-2014 when it was a mere .67 hectares. That's 0.67.

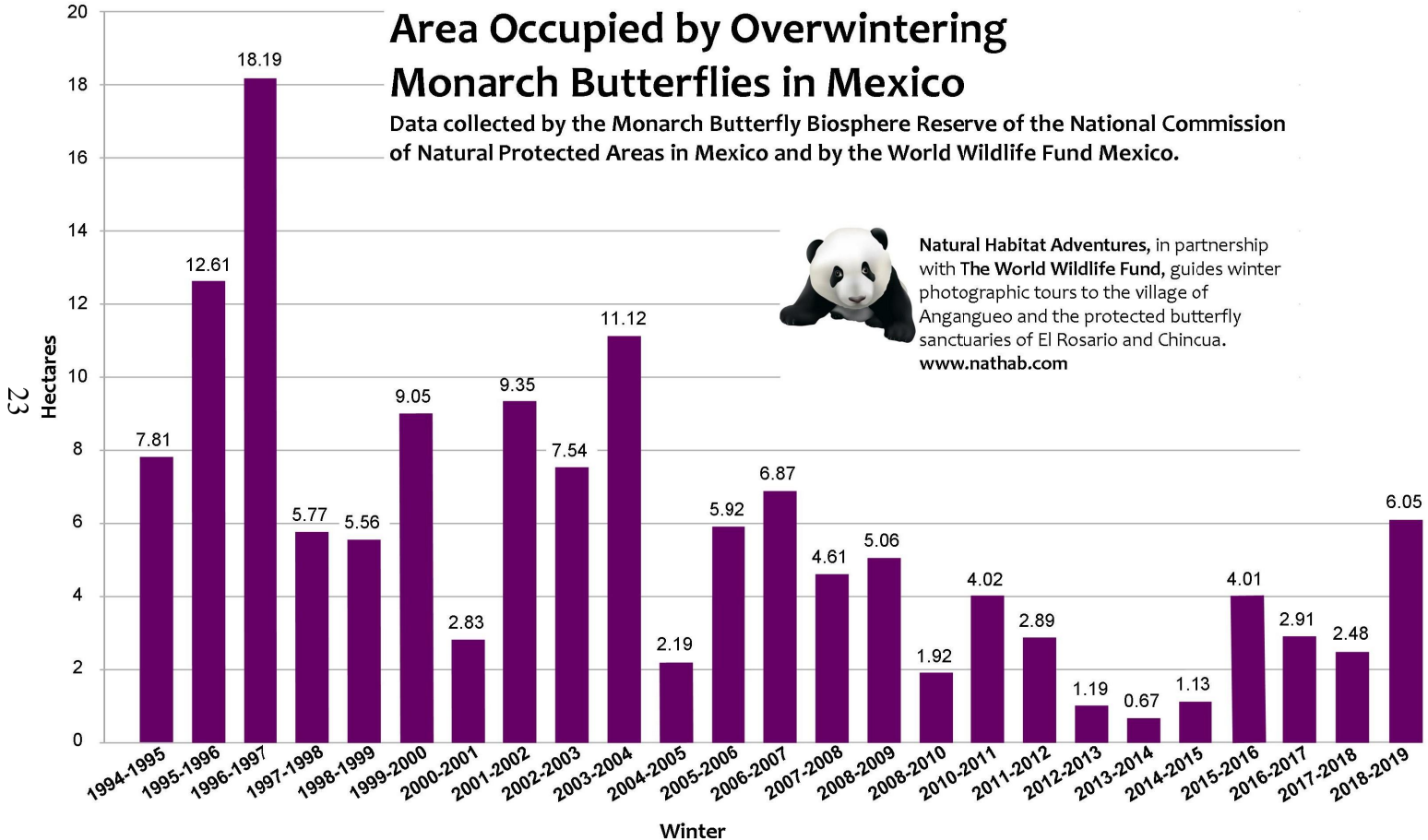
In 2015-2016, it climbed to 4.01 hectares, then dropped in the following winter to 2.91 after a late March storm killed 5 - 10%. After another decrease in 2017-2018, **the winter of 2018-2019 saw a jump of 144% to 6.05 hectares.** It's also possible monarchs are overwintering in new, remote and yet undiscovered locations. I sense that monarch observers across the country are seeing more butterflies than in past seasons, and this is encouraging, but it doesn't mean we should let up with conservation efforts. From what I've read, scientists believe the monarch population in North America is far from viable. In May, 2015, the federal government issued a Pollinator Research Action Plan that set a target goal of 6 hectares by 2020 as a measure for monarch recovery. It seems to me the figure should be far higher.

*****The USGS surveyed various monarch counts that ranged between 6.9 to 60.9 million butterflies per hectare. Its best estimate, however, was 21.1 million per hectare.

Area Occupied by Overwintering Monarch Butterflies in Mexico

Data collected by the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere Reserve of the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas in Mexico and by the World Wildlife Fund Mexico.

Natural Habitat Adventures, in partnership with **The World Wildlife Fund,** guides winter photographic tours to the village of Angangueo and the protected butterfly sanctuaries of El Rosario and Chincua. **www.nathab.com**



How to Help the Monarchs

The way everyone can help monarchs is by learning all they can about them. On pages 28-31 of this guide, I've listed online and printed resources, as well as educational events and activities people can participate in. One of the best ways to help the butterflies is by planting milkweed, their exclusive larval food in North America, in your yard and garden if you have them. Milkweed can also be grown in containers on sunny patios and in window boxes.

Northward migrating females that have overwintered in Mexico will lay an average of 700 eggs on the young milkweed plants, the larvae devour the plants, sometimes denuding them completely (It's okay, the plants will survive.) Then the adults that emerge will feed on the nectar from milkweed flowers, maybe even sticking around to mate and produce another generation.

What a joy it is to see male monarchs zipping around as they patrol our milkweed beds and containerized plants, sometimes twirling in the air around each other, fighting as monarch males fight. And then seeing a mating pair of monarchs, and then seeing eggs and busy, hungry larvae all over your plants. If you bring some or all of them into your house along with milkweed for feed, you can watch the larva transform into chrysalises and later the chrysalises into adults. I've made close-up videos of these transformations, and you can watch them on my YouTube channel, **UniversalDirt**.

I've always told my children that if you have something good, like a garden, someone or some pest will try to take it away from you, and that's true of raising monarchs as well as growing milkweed. Monarchs have their parasites, and so expect to lose some chrysalises to, say, the tachinid fly. And milkweed has pests like the messy oleander aphid (*Aphis nerii*) and milkweed bug. You'll have to find non-chemical ways to control these things or minimize their damage. My favorite milkweed plants are common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*), butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), and rose or swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*), but there are many others. The butterfly weed is compact and the flowers are orange. Rose milkweed is tall, as is common milkweed. All three are deliciously

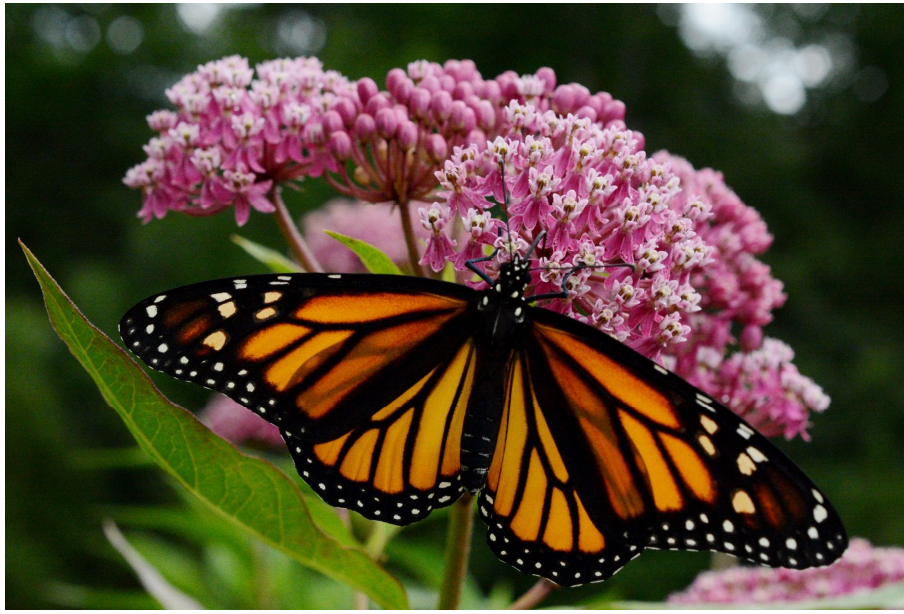
fragrant. Butterfly weed can be purchased at some of the retail plant nurseries. (See the next section.) The others may have to be grown from seeds, which you can buy at various places. Another option is to collect seeds yourself. Wherever you acquire seeds, make sure you meet their chill requirements (vernalization). When you plant milkweed, either from seed or from containers, don't put them close together because that intensifies the reproduction of pests.

You should be able to find milkweed seeds for sale locally at:

Fifth Season, 4 S Tunnel Rd, Asheville, NC 28805 (828) 412-3200

Sow True Seeds, 243 Haywood RD, Asheville, NC 28801 (828) 254-0708
(They moved their store from Church Street in late August, 2017.)

To order seeds of any of several different milkweed species as well as many other native plants, check out my favorite online seed catalog, which is from **Prairie Moon Nursery** out of Winona, Minnesota. They put out a beautiful printed catalog, too, and offer various seed combination packages. **prairiemoon.com**



*A female feeding on rose milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) nectar. This is a butterfly I raised in my bay window and released just here. The genus name of milkweed honors the Greek god Asklepios, the god of medicine. 7/5/17*

Where to Buy Milkweed Plants

A number of retail nurseries in western NC offer milkweed plants for sale. Start by calling the nurseries near you to ask what species they carry and when they will have them available. I'm only familiar with the places in the Asheville-Buncombe County area.

Appalachian Creek Garden Center
8 Mimidis Lane, Swannanoa, NC 28778 (828) 296-7396
Directions: Across the railroad tracks, near the Warren Wilson Rd/US Highway 70 intersection. **appalachiancreek.com**

BB Barns Garden Center
3377 Sweeten Creek Road, Arden, NC 28704 (828) 650-7300
Sweeten Creek Road is at Exit 51 of I-40. BB Barns is 5.1 miles S.
bbbarns.com

Mellie Mac's Garden Shack
304 State Street, Black Mountain, NC 28711 (828) 669-5727
Location: Just west of Asheville Savings Bank and the public library.
MM's has an internet presence on Facebook.

Jesse Israel and Sons Nursery
570 Brevard Road, Asheville, NC 28806 (828) 254-2671
Location: At the WNC Farmer's Market, just off I-40 at Exit 47.
jesseisraelandsons.com

Reems Creek Nursery
70 Monticello Road, Weaverville, NC 28787 (828) 645-3937
Location: Just off I-26 at Exit 18. Go S .5 mile on Monticello.
reemscreek.com

I've visited but not bought plants of any sort yet at Appalachian Creek or Mellie Mac. Reems Creek always seems to have a good supply of the plants I'm looking for or might like, but both BB Barns and Jesse Israel's also carry quality plants, and I've happily spent a lot of money with them. Based on calls I made in the summer of 2017, I'd say you will have a good chance of finding milkweed plants this current fall at one or more of these places until they sell out. In which case, as I said, buy seeds for next year, or collect your own in the field. I'm pretty sure Lowes and Home Depot don't carry milkweed.

*The milkweed plant isn't loved only by monarch butterfly larvae. Above are instars of the large milkweed bug (*Oncopeltus fasciatus*) that feeds on the seeds, here that of rose milkweed. A milkweed garden teems with life, some of it pesky, but if you're raising monarchs, you can't spray. 8/8/17*

Plant Native Nectar Sources!

Monarch adults feed on a number of nectar-producing flowers (forbs) and shrubs, so plant them in your garden and landscape in addition to milkweed with a variety to cover early spring to late fall. My favorite is the non-native zinnia. It blooms into the fall and keeps as a cut flower. Buy plants or seeds. Many seed suppliers produce packets you can pick up just about anywhere, or order online.

The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation publishes colorful Monarch Nectar Plant Guides for each region of the U.S. For examples, these are three for the mid-Atlantic region: Joe-pye weed (*Eutrochium fistulosum*), New York Ironweed (*Vernonia noveborancensis*), and Spotted bee balm (*Monarda punctata*). The Xerces Society provided the monarch migration map on page 1. **xerces.org**

The Carolina Native Nursery grows and sells numerous species of native plants, both wholesale and retail, including milkweed and nectar producers. 1126 Prices Creek RD, Burnsville, NC 28714 (828) 682-1471 Their cool website: **carolinanativenursery.com**

Monarch Educational Events in the Area

NORTH CAROLINA ARBORETUM

The Annual Monarch Butterfly Day

Held in late September

The arboretum's description of its third Monarch Day: "As part of a national effort to stave off the decline of monarch butterflies, The North Carolina Arboretum in partnership with Monarch Rescue, a non-profit organization focused on increasing monarch butterfly awareness throughout western North Carolina, will host its third annual Monarch Butterfly Day. Join the Arboretum in welcoming these regal flyers with a day full of monarch releases, crafts and fun in the outdoors." **ncarboretum.org/event/monarch-butterfly-day**

The 2nd annual monarch day was terrific. They had two monarch releases with a big crowd of people for the one we attended, an informational talk, and an ecoExplore tagging session. I was invited to set up a table and talk with people at the 3rd Monarch Day (2017). A Blue Ridge Parkway interpretive ranger joined me. Also, **they had milkweed plants for sale.** The arboretum is right next to the BRP. Take the exit at the west end (driving "S") of the French Broad River Bridge (between mile 393 and 394). The arboretum entrance is .1 mile on your left. Or you can get there from state highway 191 (Brevard Road). Admission is free, but there is a parking fee. If you have the time, the arboretum is a "must see" place on your parkway drive. ***Check their website for the event schedule.***

MOSES CONE MEMORIAL PARK (mile 294)
Interpretive Ranger Susan Brown offers seasonal monarch butterfly programs for parkway visitors and school groups. To see when she might have a program scheduled, check the BRP Facebook page **facebook.com/BlueRidgeNPS** or the **Boone *Mountain Times***. Another source of info will be the NPS's Blue Ridge Parkway calendar online.

CRADLE OF FORESTRY

Bring Back the Monarchs

They have hosted this event on a Sunday afternoon each September for several years, and I imagine they will in the future. Contact them as the season nears. Following is a description of the 2017 event:

"This afternoon program begins with an inside presentation by conservation specialist, Joyce Pearsall. Joyce has several years of experience in monitoring monarch larvae and educating the public. Learn milkweed growing tips and natural predators of monarch caterpillars. The program continues with a walk through the Cradle's lawn-to-meadow conversion areas. In some years this program aligns during the migration peaks and monarchs are seen. Here we will discuss this initiative to conserve time and energy while providing nectar sources for pollinators. Guests are invited to continue with us to the Cradle's own Monarch Waystation."

cradleofforestry.com $5.00 for ages 16 and up, free for youth.

Location: Hwy. 276 N, 4 miles from the Blue Ridge Parkway at mile 412, and 3.5 miles from Sliding Rock. The physical address is 11250 Pisgah Hwy. Pisgah Forest, NC 28768. Phone: (828) 877-3130
GPS Coordinates: Latitude 35.21'02" Longitude 82.46'43".

THE ORCHARD AT ALTAPASS

"We raise Monarchs in terrariums in the Orchard shop from egg to larva to chrysalis, to butterfly, and each fall we tag the migrating generation prior to release. So far we have had six of our tags recovered in the over-wintering grounds in Mexico. Why do we do it? We hatch Monarch butterflies to help save them from natural enemies and to delight in the life cycle of this beautiful gift of nature. Each step is exciting every time we experience it and we love to share this experience with our visitors."

Open May through October. Call (828) 765-9531 for exact days and hours, or visit their website at **altapassorchard.org**.
Location: The Orchard at Altapass is at mile 328.3 along the Blue Ridge Parkway. 1025 Orchard Rd, Spruce Pine, NC 28777

Common milkweed seed pods. The yellow dot is an oleander aphid. 8/8/17

Monarch Informational Resources

Journey North —**learner.org/jnorth/monarch**
"Journey North engages citizen scientists in a global study of wildlife migration and seasonal change. K-12 students share their own field observations with classmates across North America. They track the coming of spring through the migration patterns of monarch butterflies, robins, hummingbirds, whooping cranes, gray whales, bald eagles— and other birds and mammals; the budding of plants; changing sunlight, and other natural events. Find migration maps, images, standards-based lesson plans, activities and information to help students make local observations and fit them into a global context. Widely considered a best-practices model for education, Journey North is the nation's premiere citizen science project for children. The general public is welcome to participate."

Journey North is the best place I know to gather real-time geographical information about the monarch butterfly and its travels. The group maintains a number of maps that register reports of people in the field, and these reports are how I tell when the monarch migration will reach us. I highly encourage you to look them up, record your monarch observations, and report them to this website.

Monarch Watch —**monarchwatch.org**
Monarch Watch is a comprehensive, practical site emphasizing education about the butterflies, conservation, and research. It's run by director Chip Taylor and began back in 1992. You can learn about tagging monarchs, as well as buy tagging kits and amusing stuff like monarch t-shirts and kits for raising the butterflies.

Monarch Lover —**monarchlover.org**
Heather Rayburn, a native of Asheville, North Carolina is the official Monarch Lover of this excellent website and blog. She worked for 10½ years at the **Botanical Gardens at Asheville**, a non-profit, 10-acre public garden adjacent to the campus of UNC-Asheville and dedicated to the promotion of plants native to the Southern Appalachians. Her postings about her observations of the natural world, including her scientific adventures with monarchs, are rich with wisdom, honesty, humor, and great photographs, too. If you also are a monarch lover, I encourage you to become a part of her community.

Project Monarch Health —**monarchparasites.uga.edu**
"Monarch Health is a citizen science project to track the prevalence of the protozoan parasite *Ophryocystis elektroscirrha* (OE) in monarch butterflies."

University of Minnesota Monarch Lab —**monarchlab.org**
"The Monarch Lab aims to combine real science with techniques that work for both teachers and students. Within the Monarch Lab, there are opportunities for formal and informal educators to be guided in instructing their students to learn science in ways that reflect the science process methods scientists use to understand the natural world."

An outstanding, comprehensive and in-depth site.

The Monarch Joint Venture —**monarchjointventure.org**
"Since 2009, the Monarch Joint Venture (MJV) has brought together partners from across the United States in a unified effort to conserve the monarch migration. As a leader in monarch conservation, the MJV supports monarch conservation planning and implementation efforts on a broad scale by facilitating information sharing, partnership building, and carrying out identified conservation priorities."

A union of more than 50 U.S. government organizations, both state and federal, and private groups. Check out their member list and their "2017 Monarch Conservation Implementation Plan".

Make Way for Monarchs —**makewayformonarchs.org**
"A Butterfly-Milkweed Alliance" co-facilitated by freelance naturalist, **Ina Warren** of Brevard, NC. It's well worth a visit to their website, which contains a number of fascinating articles. As a Conservation Specialist with Monarch Watch, Ina provides monarch butterfly programs to schools, civic groups, and natural resource agencies. **Inawarren@monarchwatch.org**

Xerces Society —**xerces.org**
"The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation is an international nonprofit organization that protects wildlife through the conservation of invertebrates and their habitats. We take our name from the now extinct Xerces Blue butterfly (*Glaucopsyche xerces*), the first butterfly known to go extinct in North America as a result of human activities." I mentioned them earlier. They're brilliant.

Adult tachinid flies, parasitoids of monarch larvae, and fly cocoon shells. 5/3/17

The Mountains to the Sea & Other Trails

"The Mountains-to-Sea Trail is North Carolina's state hiking trail. It stretches 1175 miles from the Great Smoky Mountains to the Outer Banks, stopping at many of our state's most beautiful places along the way."
—**mountainstoseatrail.org**

On your BRP visit, you are likely to see painted white dots on trees or posts along the road. Those are the MTS blazes. The trail roughly parallels the parkway for some 230 miles from the edge of the Smoky National Park to Stone Mountain State Park. Any section of the trail is great if you want to hike or just stretch your legs.

My favorite sections are north of Asheville. One is just south of the Craggy Gardens Picnic Area. We call that section "the Cliffs". And the other section is off the side road to Mt. Mitchell State Park.

-For the Cliffs, park in the uphill-side grassy pullout on the L, going N, just after the Craggy Gardens sign between BRP mileposts 368 and 369. Going S that will be .5 mile below the Craggy Gardens Picnic Area turn off. There's a small earthen bank and a few split rails. Park safely. Walk S on the parkway (toward Asheville) and you'll see the blaze and trail on your right in about 80 yards. In about 15 minutes you'll come to your first overlook toward the Bee Tree Reservoir. Later on there's a second cliff and a cool rock overhang below it, but it's hard to tell how to find them. The last cliff will be in another 25 minutes or so. The trail then leads in another 12 minutes to the top of Lane Pinnacle, the loveliest and highest peak you can see from east Asheville. This section of the MTS is moderate to difficult, some of it steep—there are several places with narrow wooden steps. It is three miles from the grassy pullout to Lane Pinnacle and back.

-To find the other of my two favorite MST sections, take the side road to Mt. Mitchell between BRP mileposts 355 and 356. Going S on the BRP, the road will be just past the Ridge Junction Overlook, which is at mile 355.3. After you make the turn, you'll see a gravel pullout on your right in .6 mile. Park, walk back down the road 20 yards and

you'll find the trail marker. There's a short wooden stairway to the trail, which leads up and near Potato Knob. The trail offers great views south, which you should get to in 10-20 minutes.

Other of my favorite hikes accessible from the parkway, but not necessarily on the MST, are:

Craggy Pinnacle has 360-degree views and a low stone wall encompassing the top. It's about a 15-minute moderate walk up the .7 mile long trail of stone steps and gravel. The trail features nice rock formations, including a good view north from the top of a rock about ¾ of the way up. Craggy Pinnacle is an incredible site for star gazing. Location: The turn-off to the spacious, paved parking area is at about mile 364.2, though I'm not sure if there's an actual marker there now. Going N, the turn-off will be on your left .5 mile from the Craggy Gardens Visitor's Center. Going S, it is .6 mile from the Graybeard Mtn View overlook. This is a popular hike.

Mt. Pisgah (mile 407.6) Pisgah is the highest and most easily recognizable point you can see in the west from much of the Asheville area. About a 50 minute rocky, sometimes steep walk up the 1.5-mile trail with an elevation gain of 712 feet.

Firetower (mile 409-410) You can easily see the tower from several places along the parkway. Since it's on a ridge, it gives great views both north and south if you're brave enough to climb the metal tower steps—it's worth it! Gravel or grass parking is available next to the BRP just N of the Frying Pan Tunnel. Park and pass around the low gate. Go left and follow the gravel, rocky road up. Along the way are plenty of wildflowers, especially under the cell tower power lines. It's about a 20-minute walk up, not counting the firetower.

Skinny Dip Falls. (mile 417.0) I'm not sure if this is the official title or what the story is behind the name, it's just what my boys and everyone else calls it—I've never seen anyone skinny dipping and many people bring their children. Rather than up, this is a hike down to the upper East Fork of the Pigeon River. It's a popular swimming hole, and people jump off the rocks into the cold water. Park at the Looking Glass View overlook and find the MTS trail across the road. It's a 10-12 minute hike down on a well-worn dirt path, with some stone and log steps, switchbacks, and at the bottom a high

footbridge with handrails. Once there, you can work up or down stream either on the bank or, for more fun, right in the middle of the river (creek walking) to find a more private location.

Black Balsam One of the most popular hiking spots near the southernmost parkway. Take paved forest service road 816 that's 1.4 miles S of the Graveyard Fields parking area (mile 418.8), and in .7 mile find a parking spot along the road. There are plenty, and on a sunny summer weekend they are often full. From here, taking the Art Loeb trail on the right and touching the MST, it's about a 12-minute walk to rocks and views. The lower part of the trail has been filled in with 3-4" stone. From here you can continue on to Tennet Mountain and the Shining Rock Wilderness Area, and even hike as far as Cold Mountain. In August and September bring a bucket for the wild blueberries. The paved forest service road takes you in .5 mile more to a large parking lot and a dead end, a starting point for climbing Sam's Knob and closer foot access to the wilderness area via the Ivestor Gap Trail.

Devil's Courthouse. (mile 422.4)—2.1 miles S of the Black Balsam Road and .8 mile N of state road 215. This has plenty of parking and a paved, though steep trail to the top, which should take about 20 minutes, depending on your physical conditioning. The views are outstanding. If you are tempted to climb over the wall past the warning sign and sit on the edge of the cliff, *think again*. I've actually seen the Park Ranger way down in the parking lot flash his lights and honk at a South Carolina couple who had climbed over the wall. Later on, he waited in his car where they came off the trail and wrote them a ticket. If I recall correctly, it was a $150 fine.

Bathrooms

Probably there aren't enough convenient bathroom facilities on the Blue Ridge Parkway. True, it is outdoors and it's a natural area, and a person can always find a more or less private place down a short trail, but these near the overlooks are overused and you'd be advised to watch out for fresh toilet paper, or else scout your own spot. All of which for some people makes it important to know where the more or less civilized places are.

Mount Mitchell State Park
One near the top of the mountain and one at the Visitor's Center.

Craggy Gardens Visitor's Center (mile 364.6)
The indoor facilities are working, but they had a couple mobile units at the end of the north parking lot during part of summer 2017.

Folk Art Center (mile 382.0)

BRP Visitor Center (mile 384.0)

Mt. Pisgah Country Store (Just N of Pisgah Inn)

Pisgah Inn (mile 408.6)

Graveyard Fields Parking Area (mile 418.8)

Black Balsam/Shining Rock Wilderness Access Parking
Review: Two private outhouse stalls, and in my visits there, I've found them to smell bad, as they did when I last checked on 8/3/17.
Location: End of FS Road 816—See the Black Balsam hike description.

Whenever you are in wild and natural areas, strive to leave behind no trace of your presence there.

A hiker on the Art Loeb trail near Black Balsam. 8/3/17

A Note on Parkway Courtesy

The Blue Ridge Parkway is for everyone: drivers, riders, trail hikers, and pedestrians. No one owns the road and everyone has their own interests. Some drivers wish to go slow and take in the views. Others with sporty vehicles wish to drive faster and enjoy the curves. Bicyclists wish to feel the wind and push their bodies. Picnickers love the peace and quiet. This all means everyone has to give a little. Slow drivers should pull off at an overlook now and then to let faster drivers go ahead. Fast drivers shouldn't ride up on the rear ends of slower drivers. Bicyclists on uphill curves should pull over and pause when they've got a car or two behind them. Drivers shouldn't put bicyclists and other motorists in danger by trying to pass on blind curves. Be patient and give the riders space. Motorcyclists should be aware that that certain tailpipes can be heard from a mile or more away, and are quite loud when nearby, disturbing those on the parkway who cherish the natural sounds of wind and wildlife.

Turk's Cap (Lilium superbum) *along the BRP near Mt. Mitchell. 7/10/17*

Author

Atop Devil's Courthouse. 10/14 PHOTO BY EDITH HUNT

Mickey Hunt writes stories, takes pictures, keeps honeybees, walks in the wilderness, gardens, rears monarchs, mountain-bike rides, and otherwise notices things in western North Carolina and elsewhere.

One of his stories, the sci-fi "Attack of the Gravid Amazons" is about a young, childless couple whose marriage is failing. They decide to mend their relationship by leaving work behind and sharing in their one common interest: bug watching—on an entomological expedition to the forests of Borneo. Then, *Earth is invaded*. The story features monarch butterflies and the Blue Ridge Parkway. You can find it in Mickey's short-story collection ***When Earth Whispers & Other Mostly Speculative Tales*** or read it free on his blog.

chaoticterrain.com
chaoticterrainpress.blogspot.com -(check for periodic updates)

Record Your Monarch Butterfly Count

Date:

Location:

Longitude and Latitude:*

Time Your Count Began:

Time Your Count Ended:

Elevation:

Weather Conditions:

Temperature:

The total count:

Report at **Journey North,** their monarch butterfly section.
They will accept a photograph in addition to data and a description.
learner.org/jnorth/tm/monarch/FallWatch.html

*The BRP Road Closure Map gives the precise longitude and latitude of every foot of the parkway. Click on the overlook or picnic area symbols to learn their names. **nps.gov/blri/planyourvisit/roadclosures.htm**

Overwintering migratory monarch butterflies clustering on pine tree branches in Michoacan, Mexico. [Rotate the book clockwise 90 degrees for the correct orientation of this photo.] *February, 2015* Image © jhvephoto / Adobe Stock

Another overwintering monarch butterfly colony on pine branches in Mexico. [Rotate the book counter-clockwise 90 degrees for the correct orientation of this photo.] *December, 2013* Image © Galyna Andrushko / Adobe Stock

A cluster on vacant property near the Lighthouse Field State Beach, CA.

Thoughts on the Western U.S. Migration

During late December, 2017 and early January, 2018 my wife and I visited seven monarch overwintering sites along 250 miles of the California coast from San Francisco south. For the first two, we counted monarchs for the **Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation**. What follows are excerpts from my notes from this trip:

12/30/17 Saturday

Visited **Stern Grove** (1), a dell in the middle of dense housing, and looked around for a couple hours. At last, we saw one individual flying overhead, but did not see where it went. Drove north to the **Rob Hill Campground** (2) at the Presidio, just south of the Golden Gate Bridge. Walked everywhere in that site for a long time, but found no clusters and saw no butterflies. Eventually, we saw a monarch or two. A man with a mountain bicycle was standing there. I asked him if he had just seen butterflies and he said, Yes. He told us of his interest, and while we talked I counted 24.

12/31/17 Sunday

In the morning we went for a short walk in a redwood grove that featured one tree 60 feet around at chest high. From here we traveled around the outskirts of Santa Cruz to **Natural Bridges State Beach** (3). A park ranger told us that the blue jays were attacking the clusters and eating the monarchs, and most of the butterflies had moved south to a different site. The monarch grove at Natural Bridges was down a paved path into a dell. There were lots of people. We saw one small cluster and a lot flying. Two great horned owls tried to sleep in a close-by tree. I speculated that the owls kept the jays away. The other site is **Lighthouse Field State Beach** (4), which is in a eucalyptus and Monterey pine grove next to a neighborhood just east of the Surfer Sculpture. Someone said this site contained 15,000 monarchs. The four or five enormous clusters were larger than anything we had seen before or since. We left there and drove down Highway 1 around the Monterey Bay and then north through the town of Monterey, including Cannery Row into the town of Pacific Grove. The whole area is highly developed. The **Pacific Grove** (5) monarch grove is a small park-like square of land, covered in trees, in the middle of a residential area. The grove is

crossed by a wide, winding path. As it grew dark, we walked up and down the path a couple times, and while we saw flying monarchs, we couldn't find a cluster.

1/1/18 Monday

Andrew Molera State Park (6). Much of the park was closed due to winter storm damage. From the campground, I could see a large eucalyptus grove north, and sure enough, we found flying monarchs there. No other people were anywhere near.

1/2/18 Tuesday

We left our tent up at our camping site near Los Osos, since we planned to return, and drove south to **Pismo State Beach Butterfly Grove** (7).

Written 1/15/18

Our Pismo Grove monarch experience, and indeed the whole western monarch phenomenon, was very different than anything in the east. For us in the eastern states, we know monarch butterflies in the spring, summer, and fall. For us, the migration captures our attention. When we think of winter monarchs, Mexico comes to mind. Many people here in the east have heard of monarchs and seen them, either in fields or on the move south, but few of us know of the western migration and overwintering butterflies on the coast of California. (See the map at the beginning of this guide.) Neither do we in the east have much in the way of organized observations. Educational efforts, yes, but nothing like what I saw at Pismo Beach.

It stands to reason. The overwintering season lasts three months or so. In the winter the butterflies hang out within small geographic areas, sometimes in clusters adding up to thousands of individuals. Many sites are near high-density human populations. It makes sense that people would establish preserves and ways to see the clusters and the feeding, mating (males snag females in mid flight), sunning, watering and anything else monarchs might think of doing on their winter grounds.

The Central Coast Park Association (CCSPA) organization is a private auxiliary to the California state parks. When I first arrived at Pismo Grove, I met one of CCSPA's docents, Jene Schaefer. She told me that they have 80-90 docent staff members in the monarch program (120 in the whole district), who explain and interpret the monarch site and happenings to visitors who flood the grove during the monarch winter season, anywhere from 800 to 2,000 a day. In 2015-2016, the total number of visitors was 100,000. They arrive by car or by the busload.

The Pismo Grove site has the feel of a miniature fairground. Gravel walkways comprise the public parts of the grove, and the eucalyptus tree area is protected with a split rail fence. The grove has no permanent bathroom facility, but a couple outhouses serve the urgent needs of the thousands of visitors.

A trailer with a large window functions as a bookstore and info center. The trailer makes $80,000 a year for the monarch program. Nearby is a circle of benches where the docents give presentations. They set up telescopes focused on the clusters.

The grove is right next to the busy Highway 1, which was crowded with traffic, some of which being heavy trucks. On the other side of the highway was an active rail track. During the hours we were present, two, maybe three Amtrak trains passed by. The grove itself has only a handful of parking spaces, so most people parked along

the road in either direction as they found space, and they have to negotiate their way across the traffic. There are no crosswalks. It's not safe for children and the elderly.

The site is far from pristine. What the California monarch situation suggests is that monarchs do not need pristine conditions in order to survive. Pristine and protected *might* be necessary for them to flourish and thrive, however. They are not likely to find those conditions everywhere in western California. But with **460** sites, as compared to the 20 in Mexico, it's clear that monarchs are highly adaptable. It makes me wonder if the decline in overwintering numbers both in California and Mexico is due to the difficulty for humans in finding the sites, meaning that there could be many more than 460 and 20. We certainly had difficulty finding *known* clusters.

The story told by the park ranger at Lighthouse Field Beach testifies to the monarch's adaptability. Their traditional site was hostile with attacking bluejays, so the butterflies moved south to a small stand of pine and eucalyptus. Naturalists responded by putting up a few signs, yellow tape, and posting docents.

There's irony in the California monarch picture. So much national thinking and conversation about conservation focuses on preserving the migration and the numbers. But in California, at least, the migration may not be natural. The reason is that it seems the overwintering butterflies depend upon the flowers of the eucalyptus, which is not native at all. The tree originated in Australia, was brought to California to produce lumber, blooms in the winter, and provides nectar. I wonder if the western migration occurred prior to when the tree was introduced.

The public viewing groves are like zoos. The monarchs are protected, as they should be. But the setting is far from ideal. I'd personally rather experience butterflies in wilder places (like along the **Blue Ridge Parkway**) and apart from crowds of people. The public groves are a place of intersection. They are where people can see the monarchs without going to too much trouble. (Many CA sites are on private land.)

We, even as visitors to the crowded groves, think of the monarch migration as a wonderful, natural process, and it is. Quite possibly it's been going on for thousands of years: this seemingly frail, small creature embarking upon and completing an epic journey while encountering unthinkable obstacles. It's almost supernatural. For me it's like contemplating anything that resembles the eternal. Like gazing at the stars or a wild land or seascape. When we take time for this, when we allow our minds to rest in the vastness of the created universe, we feel at home. We see that we have a place. The troubles and conflicts of our lives seem small in comparison and from that perspective. We might feel cold and lonely with this contemplation. And yet, I don't. I feel at such times that I am part of the eternal, and this gives me comfort. **-MH**

A cute inn right next to the Pacific Grove site.